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Water in Religion



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Introduction

Water has a central place in the practices and beliefs of many religions for two main reasons. Firstly, water cleanses. Water washes away impurities and pollutants, it can make an object look as good as new and wipe away any signs of previous defilement.

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Water not only purifies objects for ritual use, but can make a person clean, externally or spiritually, ready to come into the presence of his/her focus of worship. Secondly, water is a primary building block of life. Without water there is no life, yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create. We are at the mercy of water just as we are at the mercy of our God or gods. The significance of water manifests itself differently in different religions and beliefs but it is these two qualities of water that underlie its place in our cultures and faiths.

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Comments on Water in Religion?

Buddhism



For Buddhists symbolism and ritual is pointless because they seek spiritual enlightenment that comes from seeing the reality of unreality. Bodhidharma, thought to be the first teacher of Zen Buddhism said this in the 5th Century CE:

"This mind is the Buddha. I don't talk about precepts, devotions or ascetic practices such as immersing yourself in water and fire, treading a wheel of knives, eating one meal a day, or never lying down. These are fanatical, provisional teachings. Once you recognise your moving, miraculously aware nature, yours is the mind of all buddhas."

Water does however feature in Buddhist funerals where water is poured into a bowl placed before the monks and the dead body. As it fills and pours over the edge, the monks recite "As the rains fill the rivers and overflow into the ocean, so likewise may what is given here reach the departed."

Christianity

Also see [Judaism](#)



Almost all Christian churches or sects have an initiation ritual involving the use of water. Baptism has its origins in the symbolism of the Israelites being led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea and from the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan. After Jesus' resurrection he commanded his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20).

Baptism is regarded differently in different denominations within Christendom. Baptism is a symbol of liberation from the oppression of sin that separates us from God. Except for within the Catholic Church, it is believed that baptism does not in itself cleanse one from sin, but is rather a public declaration of a person's belief and faith in Christ and it is a sign of welcome into the Church. The Catholic Church, however, believes that a real change occurs at baptism - it is more than just symbolism - it is at baptism that Catholics believe that the stain of original sin is actually removed from the individual. The use of water is important for its own symbolic value in three ways: it cleanses and washes away dirt, fills everything it enters as God fills those who are immersed in Him and we need water to survive physically as we need God to survive spiritually. In the early church baptism was usually performed with the person standing in water and with water being poured over the upper part of the body. This was called 'immersion' but today



An Activist's Prayer

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end war;
For we know that You have made the world in a
way

That we must find our own path to peace
Within ourselves and with our neighbours.

We cannot merely pray to You, O Lord, to end
starvation;

For you have already given us the resources
With which to feed the entire world
If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to you, O God,
To root out prejudice,

For You have already given us eyes
With which to see the good in all people
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to You O God, to end
despair,

For You have already given us the power
To clear away slums and to give hope
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end
disease,

For you have already given us great minds with
which

To seek out cures and healing,
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore we pray to You instead, O God,
For strength, determination, and willpower,

To do instead of just pray,
To become instead of merely to wish.

JACK RIEMER,



the term refers to the method of dipping the whole body under water which is used, for example, by the Baptist and Orthodox churches. In most Western churches today the rite is performed by pouring water over the head three times (affusion) and sometimes sprinkling water over the head (aspersion).

Another important significance of water for Christianity is the "living water" that Jesus described himself as. John 4: 1-42 is the story of Jesus and a Samaritan woman to whom he offers living water so that she will never thirst again, in other words eternal life through him.

Read the story [here](#).

Holy water is water which is blessed for use in certain rites, especially that which is blessed at the Easter Vigil for baptism of catechumens. The use of water other than for baptism goes back to the 4th century in the East and the 5th century in the West. The custom of sprinkling people with water at mass began in the 9th century. At this time 'stoups', basins for holy water from which people could sprinkle themselves on entering a church, were in common use. Holy water is also used at blessings, dedications, exorcisms and burials.



Ablutions in Christianity are mainly baptism and the washing of fingers and communion vessels after the communion. This takes place in two parts. Firstly the chalice is rinsed with the wine, and then the chalice and priests' fingers with wine and water. This ablution is important because after the bread and wine has been consecrated, Christ is believed to be present.

See [Water in the Bible](#)

Hinduism



Water in Hinduism has a special place because it is believed to have spiritually cleansing powers. To Hindus all water is sacred, especially rivers, and there are seven sacred rivers, namely the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Although Hinduism encompasses so many different beliefs among those that most Hindus do share is the importance of striving to attain purity and avoiding pollution. This relates to both physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being.

Pilgrimage is very important to Hindus. Holy places are usually located on the banks of rivers, coasts, seashores and mountains. Sites of convergence, between land and river or two, or even better three, rivers, carry special significance and are specially sacred. Sacred rivers are thought to be a great equalizer. In the Ganges the pure are made even more pure and the impure have their pollution removed if only temporarily. In the sacred water distinctions of caste are supposed to count for nothing, as all sins fall away. Kumbhamela is a pilgrimage of Hindu devotees and is held every three years at four different places in turn - Hardwar, Nasik, Prayaga and Ujjain. These places are believed to be where drops of *amrita* - the nectar of immortality - fell to earth during a heavenly conflict.



The Ganges river is the most important of the sacred rivers. Its waters are used in *puja* (worship) and if possible a sip is given to the dying. It is believed that those who bathe in the Ganges and those who leave some part of themselves (hair, bone etc) on the left bank will attain *Svarga* (the paradise of Indra). The river is said to flow from the toe of Vishnu to be spread into the world through the hair of Shiva.

Funeral grounds are always located near a river. Sometimes at the funeral a small hole is drilled in an earthen pot, which is then filled with water. As the son of the deceased walks around the burning funeral pyre with the pot, dripping water forms a limiting line to prevent the soul from escaping back into the earth as a ghost. When the heat of the pyre cracks the skull of the corpse, the mourners bathe in the river and return home. On the third day after the cremation the ashes are collected and, on or after the tenth day they are cast into a holy river.

For Hindus, morning cleansing with water is a basic obligation. *Tarpana* is the point at which the worshipper makes a cup with his hands and pours the water back into the river reciting mantras. After sipping some water, he may then apply the distinguishing mark of his *sampradaya* (tradition), and say the morning prayer, *samdhya*. *Sodhana* is Hindu purification and is necessary for different reasons and at different levels. Physical purification is a part of daily ritual which may, in the case of *sadhus* (Hindu holy people who renounce the world seeking Brahman), be very elaborate. *Sodhana* is also necessary if caste rules



have been broken, for example if someone drinks from the same vessel as a member of a lower caste, and before *puja*. Every temple has a pond near it and devotees are supposed to take a bath before entering the temple.



The story of the Great Flood of Manu appears in Hindu scriptures. This is the story of how all creation is submerged in a great deluge but Manu is rescued by a fish that he once saved from being eaten by a larger fish. The fish told him to build a large boat and to take into it seeds and animals. The fish then towed the boat to safety by anchoring it on the highest of the Himalayas. He stayed on the mountain (known as Manu's Descent) while the flood swept away all living creatures. Manu alone survived.

Islam



In Islam water is important for cleansing and purifying. Muslims must be ritually pure before approaching God in prayer. Some mosques have a courtyard with a pool of clear water in the centre, but in most mosques the ablutions are found outside the walls. Fountains symbolising purity are also sometimes found in mosques. In Islam ritual purity (called *tahara*) is required before carrying out religious duties especially *salat* (worship).

There are three kinds of ablutions. Firstly, *ghusl*, the major ablution, is the washing of the whole body in pure water, after declaring the intention to do so. Muslims are obliged to perform *ghusl* after sex which incurs a state of major ritual impurity. *Ghusl* is also recommended before the Friday prayer, the two main feasts, and before touching the Koran. *Ghusl* must be done for the dead before they are buried.



The second ablution is *wudu*, the minor ablution, which is performed to remove minor ritual impurity from everyday life. This must be done before each of the five daily prayers and involves using pure water to wash the face with pure water, rub the head with water, wash the hands and arms up to the elbows and the feet up to the ankles. This comes from the Koran 5: 7/8 "O you who believe, when you prepare for prayer, wash your faces and your hand to the elbows; rub your head and your feet to the ankles" and is elaborated on in great detail in the Sunna. Every mosque has running water for *wudu*. The third type of ablution is performed when no water is available. In this case clean sand may be used.

Judaism



In Judaism ritual washing is intended to restore or maintain a state of ritual purity and its origins can be found in the Torah. These ablutions can be washing the hands, the hands and the feet, or total immersion which must be done in 'living water', i.e. the sea, a river, a spring or in a *mikveh*. In Temple times ablutions were practised by priests, converts to Judaism as part of the initiation rites and by women on the seventh day after their menstrual period. Priests had to wash their hands and feet before taking part in Temple services. The ritual washing of hands is performed before and after meals and on many other occasions.



The story of the Great Flood is told in Genesis 6-8. God destroyed humanity by sending a great flood. Only Noah and his family and a pair of each animal were saved in the ark built by Noah. Afterwards God promised he would never attempt to destroy the earth again and sent the rainbow as a sign of this covenant. The story of a Great Flood is also found in other cultures such as the Australian Aborigines and some Pacific Islanders. The Israelites' story is different to these because it emphasises the ethical demands of God. The flood is a divine punishment from which Noah survives because of his moral worthiness. The Flood washed away all the sins of the world so that we could start afresh. This is echoed in Christianity by the death and resurrection of Christ that eradicates sin so that nothing will stand in the way of man and God.



The Red Sea is significant in Jewish history because its parting by Moses was a miraculous event at the beginning of the Exodus which enabled the Israelites to escape from the Egyptian army that was chasing them. God allowed Moses to part the sea so that the Israelites could walk safely to the other side on dry land, while the Egyptians drowned as the sea came together again. This miracle was a reward for the faith of Moses and the Israelites, God's Chosen People. The parting and crossing of the Red Sea shows that God has power over nature, even the mighty oceans. Water



here is powerful, but an instrument of God for punishment (for the Egyptians) and blessing (for the Israelites).

A *mikveh* is a Jewish ritual bath used for cleansing after contact with a dead body or after menstruation. It can also be used for immersing vessels and as part of the initiation ceremony for converts. Only water that has not previously been drawn into a container can be used, and there must be no leakages. The *mikveh* has its origins in Ancient times when people had to be purified in a *mikveh* before they could enter the Temple area. Water in this case is important for its cleansing properties.

See [Water in the Bible](#)

Shinto



Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion and is based on the veneration of the *kami* - the innumerable deities believed to inhabit mountains, trees, rocks, springs and other natural phenomenon. Worship of *kamis*, whether public or private, always begins with the all important act of purification with water. Inside the many sacred shrines troughs for ritual washing are placed. Waterfalls are held sacred and standing under them is believed to purify. Waterfalls are also used in *suigyo* (water austerities).

Zoroastrianism



The significance of water in Zoroastrianism is a combination of its purifying properties and its importance as a fundamental life element. Therefore, while water is used in purification rites and rituals it is sacred itself and so must be kept from being polluted.

Zoroastrianism is a very dualistic creed with a great emphasis placed on the opposing forces of good and evil. When the world was created the Evil Spirit Angra Mainyu attacked the earth and among other things made pure water salty. Zoroastrians believe that pollution is evil and that water, when pure, is sacred. Zoroastrians themselves must avoid pollution of any kind and must perform ritual ablutions before saying their prayers (which are said 5 times a day facing a source of light) and before any religious ceremonies such as weddings.

Purity and pollution are central concerns in Zoroastrian thought and practice. For minor pollutions, *padyab-kusti* is performed, which involves washing and saying special prayers (*kusti*). On special occasions such as weddings or initiations, *nahn* is performed which combines *padyab-kusti* with the symbolic eating of a pomegranate leaf and the drinking of *nirang* (ritual cow's urine) for spiritual cleansing. This is followed by the prayer of repentance, the *Patet*, and finally a bath. Serious pollution, for example contact with a corpse, requires the nine day *baresnum* ceremony which is held in the temple precincts and includes periods of prayer and washing with the aid of priests.

The sanctity of water is very important to Zoroastrians. People must not urinate, spit or wash one's hands in a river or allow anyone else to. In Zoroastrianism the dead are not cremated, buried or immersed in water because fire, earth and water must be kept pure. Thus, corpses are left to birds of prey.



Zoroastrians believe in 6 benevolent divine beings known as Amesha Spentas, which with God's Holy Spirit, Spenta Mainyu are linked with God's (Ahura Mazda's) creation, certain priestly rituals, observances by laypeople and the seven holy days of obligation. The Amesha Spentas are believed to dwell within each of their creations while at the same time remaining aspects of God's nature. Each Amesha Spenta protects its creation and represents an aspect of Ahura Mazda and a feature of the good creation. These creations are the means by which worshippers can approach Ahura Mazda and by which Ahura Mazda can approach his worshippers. Haurvatat (meaning wholeness, health and integrity) is a feminine being and the creator of water and is represented by consecrated water used in priestly acts of worship. The holy day of Haurvatat and water is in midsummer and people pray and make offerings by the seashore or any natural water. In everyday life Haurvatat is observed by keeping water unpolluted and being temperate and self-disciplined. Haurvatat is the personification of what salvation means to the

individual.

Zoroastrianism also has a Great Flood story. Ahura Mazda warned Yima that destruction in the form of floods, subsequent to the melting of the snow, was threatening the sinful world and gave him instructions for building a *vara* in which specimens of small and large cattle, humans, dogs, birds, fires, plants and foods were to be deposited in pairs.

Bibliography

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